

34. ALLIGATOR APPLE *ANNONA GLABRA* IN THE ANDAMANS

The Alligator apple is a wild relative of the edible custard apple. This salt-tolerant SPECIES has been spotted by us recently in the Andaman Islands.

The popular and delicious fruit custard apple and its allies belonging to the genus *Annona* L., occur in over 120 species in the tropical and warmer regions of the world, of which about 5 species grow in India and 4 in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. *A. cherimola* (cherimoya), *A. muricata* (sour sop), *A. reticulata* (bullock's heart or West Indies custard apple) and *A. squamosa* (custard apple, sweet sop and sugar apple) are well-known in India over several decades and have earned a reputation as delicacies. But *A. glabra* (alligator apple, pond apple, cork tree or pith wood) is perhaps a new entrant, at least to these islands. This handsome, swamp-loving tree was first recorded in India from the Vembanad backwaters of Kerala.

The alligator apple is a native of tropical America, distributed along the mangrove belts of coastal America, from Florida to Brazil and across the Atlantic in West Africa, from Senegal to Congo, West Indies, Sri Lanka and India. The occurrence of this associate mangrove in Andamans is being reported by the authors in the forthcoming issue of the Malayan Nature Journal. Spotting of this salt-tolerant plant in the Andamans is of great phytogeographic as well as agronomic interest, as it is a long way from the Atlantic to Sri Lanka and southwest India where the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea unite with the Indian Ocean. This probable migratory route of *A. glabra* now makes a phytogeographic bridge between Andaman Islands in the Bay of Bengal with the Atlantic ocean and the Arabian Sea across the Indian ocean. This hypothesis may be supported by its peculiar buoyant fruits, beset with a good

number of salt-tolerant seeds, which are reportedly viable for 6-7 years.

The alligator apple is a small, spreading, handsome tree 3-8 m high, with greenish yellow fragrant flowers 2-4 cm across and creamy-yellow, conical, pulpy fruits upto 10 cm long, smelling like pineapple and resembling ripe mangoes. Although the fruits are not so popular here birds, squirrels and alligators do eat and relish them. The pithy wood and roots are used for making floats and corks. The appealing flavour and aroma of this pulpy fruit, as well as its choice by birds and squirrels clearly indicate its possibility as an edible fruit. The sweet-scented quality of the fruits and the salt-tolerant habit of the plant could be exploited for crop improvement programmers. As it thrives very well in swampy situations and along the backwaters, it could be developed into a promising genetic crop stock, which could be cultivated on a large scale as a salt-tolerant species in inundated fallow fields, salt marshes and brackish wetlands of India. At present, we are trying to evaluate the economic potential and nutritional value of this fruit-bearing tree. Since all the four known species of this genus from India have already found a suitable place in the field of pomology and in the fruit markets, we hope this species will turn out to be a delicious fruit crop.

December 23, 1997

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